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Book Review

Thongkholal Haokip, *India's Look East Policy and the Northeast, Delhi: Sage Publications, 2015, pp. 212, ISBN: 978-93-515-0101-5.*

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The book, *India's Look East Policy and the Northeast*, is a timely addition to the literature whereby India is moving in closer ties with its immediate eastern neighbouring countries and more broadly, the Indo-Pacific Region for strategic security, economic investment, trade, and commerce. The author attempts to emphasize the North Eastern Region of India, an area that is neglected most of the time in the mainstream kind of literatures while analysing regional integration among the Indian sub-continent and Southeast Asia and East Asia. He asserts the policy's applicability and potential concerning coping with the issues of North East India.

The author examines the impact of India's Look (Act) East Policy on this region. He traces India's attempts towards regional integration even before pre-independence days. With the collapse of the Soviet Union at the global and in the domestic levels, political turmoils, economic crisis, social unrest, etc. are the main responsible for the initiation of the Act East Policy (AEP) in 1991. Other notable factors would be the Gulf crisis, the growing Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific Region, and ASEAN's economic positive growth. Even though the economic progress is minimal as compared to other regions of India, there is still progress in trade, tourism, and investment after the initiation of AEP in the form and manner of bilateral and multilateral Free Trade Agreements like Indo-Myanmar Trade Agreement in 1994, ASEAN-India FTA in 2009. The author concerns that India's Information and Communication Technology (ICT) services and the Indo-Pacific region's countries' prowess in the hardware and manufacturing sector as a potential area of cooperation and competition can be tapped further.

Haokip asserts that under the umbrella of AEP, India has actively engaged in various regional organizations like Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC), Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Regional Economic Forum with a view to reemphasis the Act East Policy and to give a boost to regional cooperation with its neighbouring countries.

The author extensively traces the genesis of the policy along with its phases. He also mentions and explains the objectives and priority areas of the policy, such as regional economic integration, reform, sustained economic growth, and development of the North Eastern Region.

The author deeps into dive on the theoretical interpretation of political integration during the formation of the nation-state which have found across the globe. In almost all the countries, cultural integration is undertaken as a tool for integration, yet did not happen in the case of North East India. The term 'northeast' was first used by Britishers during the colonial period to identify the area located in the northeast part of Bengal. It served as a frontier and a buffer between India and her eastern neighbouring countries. Several acts passed by Britishers such as the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873 and GoI (Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas) Act of 1935 concerning the Northeast, the separation of Burma from British India in 1937, and the partition of India in 1947, ultimately led to the creation of the North East Area as a distinct and landlock region in South Asia.

The author states that the Indian Union used different tactics like negotiations, promises, baits, and force to ensure the integration of the North East Region into it. For instance, the deadlock of Naga National Council's autonomy demand was mended with the Hydari Agreement by promising the safeguard of Naga customary laws. But extremist factions continue to fight against Indian Union still. Even Indian state applied the tactics of coercion to integrate into it, for instance the merger of Manipur. These had happened because there was a lack of shared culture with mainstream India, and the concept of 'State' came before the notion of 'Nation'. As a result, ethnic aspirations of different groups in the region and democratic deficiency, insecurity, and distrust are not adequately addressed; that's how secessionist movements resulted with time.

The author digs the economic development history of the region. Many economic changes happened after the discovery of tea in 1823 and subsequent oil exploration. Britishers started to encourage different types of immigration from various areas like Bihar, Odisha, and Madhya Pradesh to work in different fields, such as tea plantations and clerks, which led to a substantial ecological crisis and loss of revenue of the local people. The Britishers developed transport and communication facilities to exploit the resources and to expand their economic gains. The wealth drain occurred. Like the other regions, the living standard in the area did not increase because their economic activities' participation was limited.

Despite being a powerhouse of natural resources, the author was deeply anguished because the region became an internal colony of India as these resources and loyalties were almost not in the hand of local people and did not benefit them. Several organizations agitated against such core-periphery system. The Government of India was responded by several schemes, including Hill Area Development Projects, Tribal Area Sub-plan, and the formation of the North Eastern Council (NEC) in 1971 and even applied Gadgil formula.

The government did pump a lot of money. Unfortunately, due to ethnic conflicts, corruption, lack of capacity to absorb funds, and lack of training diverted funds for law and order. The continuation of insurgency provides a lame excuse by the corrupt and nexus political establishment for their non-performance.

The author examines the dynamic nature of the North East related policies undertaken by the Indian State like the Nehru-Elwin policy continued with some modification, quick administrative expansion associated with the revivalist-protectionist approach towards tribal development in the hill areas. But after the Sino-India war in 1962, the approach was drastically shifted towards security approach. This aspect adds to the process of bureaucratic securitization structure in the region. The author offers some solutions which are faced by the indigenous communities in daily life. They are required to rework the aged old ties among the transborder communities and trades, issuing work permits to reduce illegal immigration, proper border fencing and cooperation with immediate neighbouring countries to minimize the insurgency activities and to stop illegal drug and human trafficking.

Overall, Haokip discusses the political and historical integration and economic history of this region. But he does not explain the issues of narco-politics in detail. There is no separate chapter on the role of Bangladesh and Myanmar on the Act East Policy, even though he touches this with regional organizations. There is no discussion on how to tackle the tremendous force of this policy on diminishing the ethnic identities and the intertwined relationship between the protectionist policy of the Inner Line Permit System and this neoliberal policy in the long run.